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Statement submitted by Canadian Federation of University Women, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), Graduate Women International (GWI), Make Mothers Matter, Mothers Legacy Project, Soka Gakkai International, Soroptimist International, Women Graduates — USA, Inc. and World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Graduate Women International (GWI) and the above-mentioned non-governmental organisations present the following statement addressing the 63rd session Commission on the Status of Women 63 priority theme.

Gender equality is the right of all women and girls and is central to the accomplishment of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The empowerment of women and girls is a pre-requisite for gender equality. Empowerment is a process that requires that the combination of social protections, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure support be provided to women and girls when it is most needed and has the potential to synergistically advance their academic, social and economic status.

This process is most productive when it is recognizes that women and girls are not a monolithic group and that geography, history, culture, custom, age and other determining factors define groups of women and girls and that intersecting traits further differentiate within groups. And, that groups and subgroups are subject to their own unique vulnerabilities.

Therefore, Graduate Women International (GWI) calls for the assessment of the extent and nature of these vulnerabilities within groups and subgroups of women and girls so social protections, public services and infrastructure can be provided to specifically target these vulnerabilities and in targeting them, eliminate obstacles to women's and girls' rights to economic and social inclusion.

Social protections must have two basic goals: to prevent and to protect from economic deprivation.

Protections are typically government or private initiatives. As things stand, in most countries, existing social protections, if they are even offered, are woefully inadequate at preventing or protecting from economic deprivation.

We believe that governments have an obligation to the fulfilment of the two goals as they apply to their most vulnerable citizens, specifically women and girls.

To protect against and prevent economic deprivation, where vulnerabilities exist, Graduate Women International (GWI) believes that social protections must cover all of women's and girls' day-to-day basic financial needs, including food, water, clothing, decent shelter, menstrual hygiene needs, education and personal safety. For the very large number of women working in the informal economies of the world who are not protected against unexpected losses of income, Graduate Women International (GWI) believes that governments must provide insurance that can be recouped by women and girls in the event of natural and man-made disasters, crop failures, theft of possessions, non-payment by employers for services already rendered, national recessions and death that results in loss of household income.

Regarding cash transfers to women and girls, governments must work with social services and non-governmental organisations to ensure the personal safety of women and girls at the hands of their male relatives and other powerful family members who may use verbal and physical abuse to appropriate the cash.

Social protections must keep up with increases in the cost of living based on an acceptable standard of living that includes food, housing, education, transportation, healthcare and taxes.

On an as-needed basis social protections must expand to insulate the most vulnerable women and girls against the shocks of national and global economic crises

because women and girls suffer disproportionately more than men during these times and are more likely to become impoverished.

In addition to government initiatives and programs, Graduate Women International (GWI) calls upon all private sector companies to provide women-centric, employment- related protections. We encourage all private sector companies to view these protections as investments made in their "enlightened self-interest" because companies that strive for substantial gende- equality are generally speaking more successful than those that do not. Gender equality in the workplace is a function of a harassment-free settings, equal pay for equal work and gender-blind systems of upward mobility within the company. Gender equality also requires a commitment to women employees to provide benefits that consider the traditional nature of their household responsibilities. Maternity leave, child-delivery medical coverage, childcare and flexible working hours are go a very long way in ensuring that qualified women employees do not lag behind their male counterparts in pay, upward mobility and choice work assignments.

Equitable and gender responsive access to public services are central to guaranteeing opportunities for women and girls to live fulfilling and productive lives. Yet, historically, gendered barriers to public goods and services have gravely hampered women's academic and economic progress and social inclusion.

By and large, public services, have not been known for their economies of scale or their efficiencies. However, in the age of free markets, they have become scarce beca.se public sectors have been trimmed back as a requirement of structural adjustment programs. Cutbacks in city and central government services that, in many cases sustain life itself, have led to the severe degradation of women's and girls' lives.

An inherent goal in the process of empowerment of women and girls, is to make them independent from societal forces that control their bodies, minds and environments. This goal is achieved through a number of steps that women and girls must be encouraged to take. Availing themselves of services like free housing, healthcare, schools, colleges, vocational training, libraries, legal services, law enforcement and criminal justice systems, financial advice and services, favourable banking terms and conditions, transportation, childcare and social services is an indispensable interim foothold step that women and girls must be able to rely upon as they move from total dependence on others to independence.

Given the importance of the role that public services play in the process of empowerment, Graduate Women International () calls on Member States to reconsider the mass privatization of public services that has been underway during the last three decades. While privatization may have led to efficiencies that did not exist before, it has also had the effect of commoditizing services and pricing them beyond the reach of the people who need them the most. By and large, any benefits emanating from privatization have been captured by the private sector and the governments themselves and has exacerbated the economic and social exclusion of women and girls.

Infrastructure can be a powerful driver of gender quality when urban and rural planning incorporates the intention of creating gender equality. Men and women differ in infrastructure requirements. The three requirements of infrastructure identified by urban and rural women as opposed to men are personal safety in public places, logistical efficiencies and a clean environment.

It is the responsibility of governments to ensure that infrastructure planning and implementation take into consideration these expressed needs and vulnerabilities. Personal safety, the efficient pursuit of personal and professional fulfilment and an environment that promotes rather than damages health are the basic rights of all

women and girls and roads, highways, electricity and telecommunications grids, mass transportation, water, sewage and garbage disposable systems, parks and recreation, law enforcement and safety stations and environmental conservation must support the fulfilment of these rights.

The inclusion of women in infrastructure planning and implementation in some towns and villages has resulted in an increase in women's participation in paid work outside the home, social interactions and interest in learning and recreational activities as well as girls' attendance in schools and extra-curricular activities.

Therefore, Graduate Women International (GWI) calls for all governments to stipulate, in all contracts to develop infrastructure, that women's perspectives become an intrinsic part of the planning and implementation process.

Governments must recognize social protections, public services and infrastructure as the means to advance women's and girls' rights to self-actualization and the resulting gender equality as an accelerator of economic growth. This reconceptualization requires that country governments, global governance and the private sector refrain from the perception of social protections as symbolic gestures and the government to discontinue its "laissez-faire" attitude towards the planning, oversight and upkeep of infrastructure. Governments and global governance must see them as priorities that need to be adequately funded by national budgets.

Governments must, in collaboration with women's groups and non-governmental organisations, develop a long-term strategy for the provision of social protections, public services and infrastructure that has the superordinate goals of making women and girls self-reliant, independent of government support and full partners contributing to the economy, participating in the accomplishment of Sustainable Development Goals and equal beneficiaries of all positive outcomes of these goals.